

iii. Worship

You know that moment when you finally arrive at your destination?

I had that experience recently when my family and I went on vacation. We had booked a hotel, we had tied up all the loose ends for church while we were away, we packed the car and we had the most beautiful drive through the Central Valley on our way down to Southern California. But when we finally arrived at Palm Springs, when we finally arrived at our hotel, when we saw the beautiful pool and the beautiful rooms and the beautiful air conditioning, that's when it finally felt like we were on vacation. (BTW how good is Palm Springs! We didn't realise it would be quite as hot as it was... We knew it was the desert and summer, but when we got there it was 121f! That's hot! Apparently that was a record temperature, hottest it's been since the 1960s...)

But back to the point I was making: I enjoyed the journey, but arriving at the destination was magnificent!

In our Psalm today, the psalmist has that experience of arriving at the end of the journey. Arriving at the destination. Arriving at the place that he had been thinking about and praying about and planning for. Arriving at the house of the Lord.

That's what we're thinking about this morning as we open Psalm 122, so why don't we pray and then we'll look at the passage in detail.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you as always for your word, for speaking to us through it. Remind us today about the goodness of being in the house of the Lord, being in your presence. Help us to rejoice in being with you, in being your people, in being with always through the Holy Spirit. Teach us this today, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

Well we are back in the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120-134, these psalms that were sung by Jewish pilgrims each year on their way up to Jerusalem for the festivals. These were '*songs for the journey*', as we've called our sermon series, songs that help God's people focus in on the goodness of God and the reason we keep seeking him day after day.

And the beauty of Psalm 122 is that it is a psalm of arriving at the destination!

¹ I rejoiced with those who said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord."

²Our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem.

The Psalmist has been looking forward to this moment. When it was time to start the journey (v1) he was full of joy at the idea of going up to 'the house of the Lord'. And now v2 he is standing at the gates of Jerusalem. His feet are touching that hallowed ground. Perhaps it's like when you get off an aeroplane in a new country, and you smell the air – does anyone else do that, or is it just me? You smell the air and you take it in and you enjoy that moment of having your feet on foreign soil. Or perhaps it's the moment of coming home and having your feet on home soil. I think that's the feeling the Psalmist has in v2. He is home. He has arrived.

And he looks around. At Jerusalem, the city built in the shadow of the Temple, a city which symbolises God's promises and God's presence and God's peace and God's prosperity. All there laid out before the Psalmist as he arrives at the city gates...

And as he looks in, in vv3-5 the Psalmist reflects on the nature of the city laid out before him. Because it's not just Rome, or Paris, or New York. Jerusalem is a city with more going on than just its physical beauty.

Look at v3:

³*Jerusalem is built like a city
that is closely compacted together.*

Now we lose something in translation here. V3 doesn't mean that Jerusalem is cramped and compact and crowded.

It's actually talking about the architecture of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a physical masterpiece, laid out and built skilfully so that the whole city was an architectural metaphor for the order and beauty of the God that it represented. That is one of the gifts of good architecture – it transcends pure functionality, and it points to something greater. I think that's what the psalmist is getting at here.

The temple walls, for example, were built of colossal pieces of stone the size of a city bus – the biggest ones 35 feet long and 11 feet wide and 11 feet high, hewn and trimmed in the quarry so that they could be dropped into place without a tool needing to be lifted on the building site. No mistakes, no miscalculations, just perfection.

That kind of attention to detail points us to the God who was behind the design of the temple – meticulous, majestic, unmoveable and permanent, just like the temple that was built for him.

And that's what the Psalmist sees when he looks in at Jerusalem.

But there's something else that v3 hints at. And that's about the unity of the people all gathered at that time for the festival.

I don't know if you've ever been in a place where everyone seems to be on the same wavelength, where there is just this group buzz, a positivity that overcomes division. For me that was what we experienced in Sydney during the 2000 Olympics. For those 2 weeks, people from everywhere converged on the city and the stadiums and the train stations and the special bus services that transported people to the venues. People wore their countries flags and clothing proudly, but all in the good-hearted nature of the competition. It's a bit of a golden memory for me.

And for the psalmist, Jerusalem was like that during the festivals. It wasn't just the buildings that fitted together neatly, but the people, gathered from all over with one common purpose –
v4

⁴That is where the tribes go up—
the tribes of the Lord—
to praise the name of the Lord
according to the statute given to Israel.

All the tribes were gathered to praise the name of the Lord, to come together before the God who had gathered them; rejoicing, praising, worshipping just as God's statutes laid out that they should.

But the interesting thing about that – even though God had commanded his people to remember the festivals, even though God had decreed that they should come to Jerusalem as the designated place of worship, despite all that, the people weren't there out of duty. The psalmist is not there because he is being forced into a religious ceremony that doesn't mean anything to him. No, this Psalm drips with the psalmist's anticipation, his expectation, his excitement to be there in Jerusalem, for the chance to go to the house of the Lord (v1).

This is a family reunion for the psalmist – the other tribes are the extended family of God's people, all descended from the 12 sons of Jacob who became the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel. And that's what these festivals represented – the gathered people of God, the family of God praising God's name together.

And the reason for their praise is there in v5 – because there in Jerusalem stand two thrones:

⁵There stand the thrones for judgment,
the thrones of the house of David.

Jerusalem was of course the capital city of the kingdom of Israel. It's where the kings of Israel made their thrones, according to the promise of God in 2 Samuel 7. You see God had promised

to establish the house of David, his dynasty, and that there would always be a king on the throne from David's descendants.

That was one of the thrones in Jerusalem, and of course a king's throne represents peace and security for the people of the kingdom (which feature in vv6-9).

But there was another throne in Jerusalem, and that was the throne of judgment – we see it in v5.

Because Jerusalem wasn't just the capital city of a kingdom, it was the city that God had chosen as the place where his people would come to worship Him. The home of the temple, the place where God's people could come into his presence. The place where people came face to face with their own sinfulness, where they came to confess their sin and express their repentance in front of the throne of judgment, the throne of God himself.

Make no mistake – this coming before God was a serious business. The sacrificial system reminded God's people that our wrongdoings come at a cost. The people brought heifers or lambs or goats, or birds, or grain or olive oil – whatever was precious to them, and they laid them down at the altar of God, just as God had commanded.

Now it was more bloody than that. The animals were killed, and their blood was sprinkled over the altar as a reminder that sin brings death...

PAUSE

But come back to the beginning of this psalm, back to the tone of **joy** that the psalmist has in coming to Jerusalem, in coming into the presence of the Lord. He doesn't have a sense of dread or doom or judgment, instead praise because of God's mercy in providing a way for sinful humans to find forgiveness, restoration and a renewed relationship with the God who loves us.

Because God didn't create the world out of spite so that he could bring judgment on helpless sinners. He created us out of his great love, and he has saved us from our sinful mistakes because of his great love. And in the Bible story from beginning to end, we see God's faithfulness to that plan worked out in every age.

And so the Psalmist approaches Jerusalem with confidence. With joy. With the deep peace of one who knows God's forgiveness. He approaches Jerusalem as the place that reminds him how God works out his plans to prosper his people, and to bring them security – vv6-9.

That's the historical context of the Psalm.

Of course we come to the Psalm from a different context in many ways. But I want to think about how we can take this Psalm into our own experience, and our own worship.

And I think the place to start is the first verse again.

¹ I rejoiced with those who said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the Lord.”

For us, going to the house of the Lord is no longer going to the temple in Jerusalem, it's being part of a local church gathering wherever you live in the world. And I love the sentiment in the first line – *I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.”*

When you look at the statistics of church attendance in the United States, we've seen a steady decline in regular church attendance across recent decades.¹ A steady decline in the numbers of people calling themselves Christians. And just in the last few months, with Coronavirus, some alarming statistics about the numbers of Christians who have stopped attending in any kind of church service. Something like 32% of people who would normally have gone to church on a Sunday have just dropped all worship just like that...²

Now if you're watching, I know I'm preaching to the choir, and praise God for your faithfulness. But what we need to do together is to remind our church family about the goodness of meeting together, even in this strange online way. Did you see in v1 – the Psalmist rejoiced because someone invited him to go up to worship. He was encouraged and reminded and carried along by the faithfulness of his friends.

Sometimes all it takes is a reminder from a friend.

And it's so easy to share church while we're online like this – you can share the link on your Facebook, or you can send it on email to someone. You can send them to our website or help them download our app. We can help people step back into the house of the Lord without even leaving their homes...

And that has actually happened within our church family during this COVID crisis. A couple of months ago one of you asked me to call through to a lady who is housebound. We had a wonderful conversation over the phone, I prayed for her, and then I asked if she'd like to receive our sermons in the mail. She doesn't have the internet, so we started posting paper sermons to her and she is so overjoyed to be able to 'come back' to church. To connect again with the God who loves her, and to connect with the church family that he has put in her life.

That's just one example. I'd love to hear how you've been sharing Jesus with people over the last few months, because I'd love to think that the Yountville Church is pushing back against those statistics from the rest of the country. I'd love to see us more committed, more joy-filled, more prayerful, more united than ever before despite the physical barriers to meeting together.

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>

² <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>

Because the church is meant to be like the people in Jerusalem for the festivals. We are meant to come together, with common mind and common purpose in serving God, we're meant to have that festival feel as we come together to worship the God who has brought us together.

In a couple of months' time, God willing, we'll have a new building here in Yountville, and I can tell you that the building will be beautiful! And, again God willing, we'll be able to meet together face to face. And I know that we are all looking forward to seeing the building, but the building doesn't define who we are as God's people. The building doesn't bring us shape or identity or existence as a church.

No, our shape and identity and existence come from the fact that God has called us together, and gathered us, even as a little church in Yountville.

Because there is something about the gathered people of God that points to the heavenly gathering of all of God's people, the gathering of God's people around his throne and the throne of the lamb which will continue into all eternity. Because that's the true end of this pilgrimage in Christ. Not arriving at a church in Yountville, but arriving at the universal church gathered in God's presence, singing his praises and celebrating his justice and mercy richly poured out upon his people.

When we gather together Sunday by Sunday, we anticipate that future gathering of all of God's people.

But Sunday by Sunday we also get to live the reality of that future gathering in a small way together.

Because church is a little slice of heaven, a visible reminder of what's to come, where God brings together people from diverse backgrounds and unites them around a common love, a common purpose, a common goal. Where he unites us around his throne as king, and around his throne of judgment. Because it is at the throne of judgment that we see the fulfillment of the OT sacrificial system. It is there that we see the end point of God's love for us. As we see lamb of God, Jesus Christ, whose blood was shed and sprinkled on the altar to bring us life. Because the throne of judgment is also the mercy seat.

And that is our ultimate cause for celebration, our ultimate reason for worshiping God. Celebrating Jesus' sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins, celebrating the new life we have in the power Jesus' resurrection, looking forward to the hope of eternal life. That is news worth praising God for!

And as we gather together, as we pray, as we live that truth, it brings us joy. And peace. And security, just like it did for the Psalmist.

Not surprisingly, the statistics show that those who have wandered from church during COVID feel less peaceful, more anxious, more insecure. They need a friend to say: *Let us go to the house of the Lord...*

What about you? How are you traveling in this season? Personally I'm finding this a trying season. I love people. I love you! I'd love to be meeting together on weekends and during the week and getting coffees together, or having you over for a BBQ. But we can't right now – we need to follow the guidelines that our government leaders have issued. That's part of being good citizens, and God willing, it will minimize the time that we are on lockdown.

But being on lockdown shouldn't lock us down from worshiping our God. We can't step into the church together, but you can step into your prayer closet. You can open the Bible and go into the presence of the Lord that way. You can download our Bible studies on the Psalms and work through them over the phone with a friend. You can get on Zoom and talk and pray with our church family the way you do with your biological family. There is nothing stopping us from gathering together in small ways while we wait to open up in bigger ways.

Because there is no joy like worshiping together with brothers and sisters in the Lord. So this week, let us go to the house of the Lord...

Shall we pray?

Further Prayers

Father, help our hearts approach time with you with great joy. Remind us Lord of the amazing privilege it is to call you Father and of your love, grace and mercy shown to us by giving us your son, so that he might be our substitute, taking on your judgement and wrath for our sin on the cross, that we might truly live. Thank you, Lord, and help us to approach you with great joy.

We give you thanks for your church and how it can show the world your glory. Even though we are not meeting together in person, help us be disciplined in continuing to watch, listen and be connected through our online church services each Sunday, not because we have to but because we want to. Let us not wish this time away but to make the most of it for your glory, to grow and mature in our precious faith, to spend time in your word, committing our lives to you in prayer and walking with you in this season of life.

Thank you, Father, for summer vacation, for times of rest and refreshment. We continue to pray for good health and safety for those traveling. Turn our hearts to you Lord as we continue in our study of the Psalms. Help us to cling to you, trust you and know you more and more, so that we enjoy you, be a witness to you and joyfully share our faith with others.

In Jesus name we pray, Amen